

BLUES HIT BY PHILLIPS INJURY

A FACIAL injury sustained by Alan Phillips in the first half at Walthamstow Avenue on Tuesday night, may have cost Wycombe Wanderers the Rothmans Isthmian League title this season. The Wycombe player's injury came after a clash with Avenue's Dean Mooney.

With seconds to go before half time Walthamstow were about to take a throw in when Phillips held his head in his hands after an off the ball incident. Referee Maber consulted both linesmen but all three had missed the offence and therefore took no action.

The Wycombe players — and several supporters — had a clearer view and alleged that Mooney had 'elbowed' Phillips. Mooney had previously suffered an eye injury himself after a clash of heads with Keith Mead. Both Mooney and Phillips left the field because of their injuries and both needed hospital attention.

The Blues were a goal down at the time and without the competitive spirit and fire of the in-form Phillips, they buckled under fierce Walthamstow pressure in the second half. The back four was never as stable — hardly surprising as they had to reshuffle the team — and it could be that this one tragic injury may decide the destiny of the championship.

This defeat now means that Wanderers must win their last two matches to

By STUART EARP Walthamstow Avenue 3, Wycombe Wanderers 2

stand any chance of taking the title. They are a point behind Enfield and have played the same number of games while Dagenham can join Enfield on 78 points if they win their two matches in hand. So both of them must slip up for Wanderers to finish top. Goal difference may play a vital role and Dagenham's is the best at the moment.

Things started to go wrong for the Blues before the kick-off. Manager John Pearson, re-appointed late, arrived when Dylan Parsons was late arriving having missed the team coach and so Steve Hill came in with Tony Horseman — back in action for the first time in five weeks — the substitute, Gavin Fraser replaced the unavailable Graham Mansfield.

Tuesday's rain, which had previously caused two postponements of this fixture, had a beneficial effect on Avenue's Green Pond Lane pitch and although there were a few small pools of water on the surface, the ball bounces of the ball was good.

Wanderers had to win their last three games to claim the title by a clear points margin, were never at their best in the first half. Some players seemed too casual and overconfident for a game of such importance and it was only in the se-

cond half that they showed the aggression needed to win games of this nature.

Avenue struck the first blow after 20 minutes when Phillips was penalised two yards outside the box for a foul on Alan Hunter. Wycombe lined up their defensive wall but Len Rayner drove the free kick perfectly past John Maskell's fingertips and into the corner.

REAL TEST

This set-back presented a real test to Wanderers' character but at this stage, few envisaged the pennant race would continue before the half time whistle. Wycombe had a couple of chances before the break, the best failing to Hill. It came in the 31st minute when Howard Kettleborough headed through Ian Pearson's corner. Goalkeeper Jerry Moore had a shot and the ball bounced two yards from the line but Hill lunged too late to knock the ball home and the chance was gone.

Wanderers seemed confident enough despite being a goal down and their players were frequently in the area, but out of trouble, with slick passing. In midfield Gavin Fraser and John Priestley won several 50-50 balls against the distribution from this department was poor.

Nevertheless Wycombe had everything to play for in the second half and they must have

been hopeful of pulling at least a goal back. But then came the Mooney-Phillips incident which transformed the whole of the game.

With neither player appearing for the second half, Wycombe were forced to move Bob Davies and Len Rayner back into the line-up. John Priestley to left back, Horseman came on up front and although Pearson played a deeper role, it was virtually a 4-4-2 formation. Avenue on the other hand, suffered little. Their substitute was regular defender Trevor Blacklin who came on at centre back and enabled the veteran Brian Jackson to move up front.

Understandably, Wanderers never regained their earlier control at the back. Under a barrage of high balls from Walthamstow, they made crucial errors which were punished and it is in these crucial moments that Avenue had in a chance of saving a point. Indeed, they had enough chances to have even won the game.

They were dealt another body blow in the 50th minute when their home side injured Alan Hunter. This was after poor marking from Hunter, towering above the defence to head home Rayner's corner in-off the underside of the bar. One could only wonder whether the goal would have been scored with Phillips on the field.

Wanderers dug deep into their

reserves. In the 56th minute they pulled a goal back to put themselves into the game again. This was after a free kick from Mick Hollifield after Horseman and Pearson had combined well on the right. Hollifield took Pearson's pass, turned and left Moore rooted to the spot with a glorious drive into the corner from the edge of the box. A minute later Kettleborough headed wide from a free kick, a chance that might have altered the whole pattern of the game.

The head of Keith Mead served the Blues well under this barrage but the pressure told in the 83rd minute when Avenue made it 3-1. Hunter flicked the ball on to Jackson and the ball bounded off the head of Mead who was unable to control Jackson ran on and gave Maskell no chance with a drive into the far corner.

It looked all over for Wanderers but they staged a gritty fight back in the closing stages which might have earned them a point. A goal from Pearson began soon after Avenue's third goal. Kettleborough chested down and had only Moore to beat from three yards out but incredibly ballooned the ball over the top.

Three Wycombe corners followed and the time added on for time wasting — there was four minutes of it — Fraser showed what might have happened if Wycombe had taken their chances by driving home the Blues second goal. Richard Birdson, who had replaced Pearson's corner and Gavin gave Moore no chance with a fierce ground shot from 25 yards.

WALTHAMSTOW: T. Moore, D. Birdson, B. Jackson, A. Droy, R. Bradford, J. Knapman, L. Rayner, A. Howe, R. Sedgewick, D. Mooney (sub T. Blacklin 45 mins), A. Hunter.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips (sub A. Horseman 45 mins), R. Davies, L. Rayner, C. Pearson 45 mins, H. Pearson, M. Kettleborough, S. Hill.

Referee: T. Maber (Brentford) **Half-time:** 1-0. **Goalscorers:** **Walthamstow:** Rayner (20), Hunter (50), Jackson (83). **Wycombe:** Hollifield (56), Fraser (90).